Safe neighborhoods initiatives rely on evidence developed in partnership with local stakeholders and communities. What type of practices can be used for taking into account evidence stemming from "local knowledge" (Fleming and Rhodes 2018)?

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Introduction

Evidence-Based Policy Making (EBPM) is one of many approaches that can be used to describe research-based evidence to inform policymakers on 'what works', in aid of producing better policy outcomes. This paper looks at the application of EBPM in relation to safe neighbourhoods initiatives by exploring the evidence developed in partnership with local stakeholders and communities, and what type of practices can be used for taking into account evidence stemming from 'local knowledge'. This is accomplished by providing an overview of EBPM and the associated theoretical discussion followed by an examination into the actors within the policy cycle, concluding with recommendations for future policymaking.

Policy Background/Context

Fleming and Rhodes (2018) article investigates evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) and the extent to which evidence and other forms of knowledge are utilised in the police's decision-making process. They argue that experience and local knowledge is vital in evidence-based policing as 'it is the key to weaving the varieties of knowledge together' (Fleming and Rhodes, 2018). Recently, Government legislation such as the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act has demonstrated how community engagement from local practitioners can resolve issues of disruptive or criminal behaviour. However, it is often contested if 'evidence-based' or 'experiential knowledge' is most suitable in the decision-making process (Fleming and Rhodes, 2018).

In the UK, EBPM is often associated with the Labour government under Tony Blair, which aimed to lessen the influence of ideological actors and involve outside partners in

policy creation. The Government has continued to use EBPM and utilise the 'what works' approach to the policy making-process. This is evident in the 'What Works Centres' which were established in 2013 by the Cabinet Office (Fleming and Rhodes, 2018). The aim was to create centres which seek to implement policy that is 'made on the basis of strong evidence and what we know works' and present it in a 'simple, relevant format' (Cabinet Office, 2013).

One of the centres, 'What Works Centre for Crime Reduction' (WWCCR), utilises EBPM to reduce crime. The centre, which is part of the College of Policing, provides police officers the opportunity to 'establish a common database of knowledge' and expand their existing skill set in order to 'appraise' and make practical use of evidence in the decision-making process (Fleming and Rhodes, 2018). Evidence is often obtained through systematic reviews and rigorist tests, such as randomised controlled trials (RCTs). RCTs 'test, learn, adapt' cycle ensures policy is consistently refined and is considered the most effective way to test if a policy is working (Cabinet Office, 2012). However, this process neglects the experience and knowledge from local stakeholders as Fleming and Rhodes suggest, 'proponents of RCT are unlikely to value a plurality of sources and forms of knowledge in UK public policymaking.'(Fleming and Rhodes, 2018). Therefore, Fleming and Rhodes article highlights the issue of evidence in the policy making process, specifically citing how knowledge and experience from local stakeholders can aid the decision-making process.

Theoretical Discussion

Evidence based policy making (EBPM) is a framework which posits that policy should be developed and refined on the basis of available objective evidence and rational policy analysis (Cairney et al, 2016). The concept is partially attributed to the rise of evidence-based practices in fields such as medicine. EBPM seeks to remove the political nature of 'evidence' from policymaking, encouraging a break from 'common sense' and 'ideological' drivers of policy (Head, 2016). EBPM offers advantages in comparisons to more traditional policy making narratives. Bowers and Testa (2019) find

the involvement of external partners in policymaking through EBPM allows for policymakers to be better informed about the design of research which is performed in support of a certain policy.

However, critiques of EBPM persist despite its widespread adoption in many countries. Cairney (2019) notes the ideological nature of prior policy making frameworks has not been entirely discarded by proponents of EBPM. Instead, the political nature of evidence and its selection is controlled for the purpose of enhancing arguments. Furthermore, Lancaster et al. (2020) argue that the 'cherry picking' of evidence by policy makers is liable to erode trust in government policy on pressing issues and between policymakers and experts. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, public health experts openly criticised government policy on social media (Horton, 2020), undermining both the policies and the 'objective evidence' supposedly used in their creation.

Local Knowledge as Evidence

As the reliance of evidence in policy making increases, there has been vast discussion regarding what can be defined as 'evidence'. One discussion centres around 'local knowledge' as evidence. Yanow (2004, p.10) defines local knowledge as formed 'within a community of practitioners'. Thus, it is knowledge developed and accepted by a group of individuals interacting within a specific context. As such, the safe neighbourhood initiatives are tied to the exercise of discretion by street-level bureaucrats (SLB's), such as police officers, and are linked with their subjective understanding of experience.

Local knowledge is complex as it evolves. Individuals present at the time of an event will explain the event in the context of how *they* perceived it, and what discretion they used to form a solution. Within policing environments, Fleming and Rhodes (2018, p.3) note that officers may select their knowledge 'based on whether it makes sense to them and fits in with what they 'know already." In their study, officers explained that they used local knowledge to problem solve and make decisions. If an issue arose, they were likely to ask superior or long-serving colleagues for advice. Moreover, officers described that local departments will have their own interpretation of force policy specific to their

local area, and so real-world practise of a policy may vary from one squadron to another. Fleming and Rhodes note that officers observe a demise of the notion of 'local knowledge', however still rely heavily on the practice to understand their working environment. For example, senior or long-serving officers may be asked for advice when dealing with crimes in certain areas. Therefore, when exploring what type of practices can be used for safe neighbourhood initiatives, it is important to note that officers may utilise local knowledge in their work, despite not necessarily deeming it as traditional or reliable. This may impact the results of a role out of safe-neighbourhood initiatives between squadrons.

Actors within the Policy Cycle

With reference to the 'What Works Centres' in the policy background, it is evident that the College of Policing and the WWCCR are key actors within the policy cycle. As reiterated, the role in the identification of the best available evidence on what works approaches to reducing crime are demonstrated through the Crime Reduction Toolkit. This includes various forms of policing, such as problem-orientated policing and community policing. However, one approach added to this toolkit is 'Hotspot Policing' which was introduced by the College's What Works Centre (College of Policing, 2020).

Hotspot policing, also known as targeted policing, is an initiative that takes into account the rough distribution of crime. This is based within neighbourhoods and targets resources for micro-locations. An effective aspect of the initiative is the introduction of measures that reduce the opportunities for committing crime such as the 'situational crime prevention'. This has introduced measures such as installing surveillance and cleaning up the environment.

Additionally, much of the discussion around significant actors, such as residents and communities, focus on the role of policing in neighbourhoods. This is demonstrated in the reduction of crime through prevention and deterrence, alongside building relationships with trusted communities. Karn (2013, p.31) stated that neighbourhood

policing 'helps build trust, reduce fear and encourages reporting', particularly with the aid of flexible approaches to recognising residents' concerns, understanding expectations and involving them in any developing responses that prove to be effective. This is evident through forms of community engagement which are tailored to specific groups, such as new migrants.

Recommendations

Given the above discussion, we make the following recommendations.

Despite the usefulness of local knowledge, caution must be applied when utilising it within community policing. Local knowledge, like all evidence used in policy making, can be regarded as subjective or 'political'. For example, only certain members of the community are willing to share their insights with the police. Thus, certain key viewpoints may be missed, such as the views of perpetrators of anti-social behaviour. Policing policy adopted solely on the basis of those insights may be incomplete or otherwise biased. Therefore, it is recommended that practices are not developed entirely on the foundation of 'local knowledge', but refer to more traditional 'evidence' in order to implement a complete and informed initiative.

It is further recommended that caution is to be used when implementing progressive new safe neighbourhood initiatives. As the articles noted, a reliance on historical experience, foundational local knowledge to problem solve, and implementing new regimes may be undermined if it is deemed incompatible with an officer's local knowledge of a neighbourhood or crime.

A final recommendation would be the use of local stakeholders and members of the community as a valuable form of evidence in the decision-making process. Government programmes, such as the 'New Deal for Communities' and the 'Communities First Programme', have relied on personal experience and 'expert knowledge' from local communities in the decision-making process (Pill, 2012). This initiative demonstrates

how experience and knowledge from the local community can be an effective form of evidence in the policy process.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the use of local knowledge as evidence in safe-neighbourhood initiatives. A background to this topic was provided by explaining the prevalence of EBPM and exploring the use of local knowledge as evidence. Furthermore, there was a focus on actors within this policy environment and the ways in which officers may rely on local knowledge when making key assumptions about appropriate solutions to common problems. Finally, key recommendations were suggested for those considering the use of local knowledge when implementing safe-neighbourhood initiatives.

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